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IMMIGRATION AND THE AMERICAN LABORING CLASSES

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In discussing the subject of The Relationship of Immigration to the Condition of the Laboring Classes in the United States, I want to present the matter from the standpoint of a workman. I have spent all my life either as a workingman or as an employee of workingmen; hence I have had an unusual opportunity to observe the influence of immigration upon the standards of living among workingmen.

At the outset I wish to lay down the fundamental proposition that a low standard of living is not compatible with a high race development. I have absolutely no prejudice against the immigrant; I have no sympathy with the spirit that has made a slogan of the words, "America for the Americans." While I am an American in all that the word implies, I believe that we should welcome to our country all the white races from every part of the earth; provided, however, that in coming here these immigrants do not lower our American standard of living; and provided further, that they be admitted only in such numbers as will make it possible to assimilate them and bring them up, within a reasonable time, to the standards of life and labor which have been established here.

Those who are familiar with the migration of races from one country to another know that in the early history of this Republic every healthy immigrant arriving upon our shores was an asset to us; but during the past ten or fifteen years immigration has increased so rapidly and has reached such stupendous proportions that many of these immigrants, instead of being assets, are in reality liabilities. A man is of value to this country only so long as his presence here makes for the betterment of the people and the institutions of the country. If more immigrants are admitted than are required to fill unoccupied positions, and if, as a consequence, they are compelled by their necessities to compete with Americans for

positions, and if as a result of such competition the standard of living is lowered, then such immigration will not make for either the commercial or the moral advancement of the people of our country.

During the past ten years 8,515,000 immigrants have been admitted to the United States. More people have come to America in the past ten years than have gone from one country to another heretofore during any one hundred years. In ten years the net gain in our population from immigration alone has been nearly 6,000,000. I submit that notwithstanding the unprecedented development of this country and the unusual opportunities existing here, we cannot assimilate five or six million people every ten years. Last December, as a result of the most careful investigation, it was ascertained that in the United States there were some 2,000,000 men out of work. At the present time it is safe to say that there are still approximately 2,000,000 persons in enforced idleness. Yet, in the face of this, during the past three months the emigration to this country has been at the rate of 1,000,000 annually. About 200,000 immigrants have been admitted during this period. They have come at a time when 2,000,000 persons, principally Americans, are on the streets looking for work. Surely these immigrants, arriving under such conditions, contribute nothing to the commercial, intellectual, or moral advancement of our country or its people.

We Americans are prone to speak with disrespect of the tramp; we characterize him as a "hobo," and frequently we call him a criminal. When I was quite a young boy, I, with many others, was thrown out of employment, our places having been given to immigrants who would work cheaper. Being unable to secure work at a living wage nearer home, I was compelled to travel, walking most of the way, nearly 1,500 miles in search of employment. During this journey I saw hundreds of men walking from place to place looking for work, and I have seen them forced to ask for bread. In no case did I ever see a man ask for bread without observing that the effect upon him was most degrading and demoralizing. In begging for food a man's sense of pride and shame suffers a most serious shock, and in time it is entirely destroyed. Finally he becomes accustomed to the new environment and often joins permanently the army of tramps and mendicants.

It may not be uninteresting to observe that while looking for work myself and during the many years of my activity as a leader

of workingmen, I have never seen a newly-arrived immigrant tramping the highways seeking employment. On the surface, this statement may seem to be a tribute to the immigrant; but, as a matter of fact, properly interpreted it means that the newly-arrived immigrant has underbid the American workman and secured his job. He has sent the American workman "on the road" by taking the place he held at a rate of wages lower than the American would accept. It may be said in answer that the American should work for as low wages as the immigrant; that half a loaf is better than no bread. But there is a standard of ethics among American workmen which deters them from working for less than the established rate; they would rather tramp than reduce the wage scale or lower the standard of living. In this position they are right, because if they reduced the wage scale to keep themselves employed, it would be a question of only a short time before the entire wage scale would be lowered and the standard of life and labor among all workingmen would deteriorate.

Conditions in America are not so favorable now for a large immigration as they were years ago. In the early times immigrants could be so distributed throughout our cities and rural communities that the Americans and those with American standards remained in such ascendancy that they were able to assimilate the immigrants, thus maintaining the standard of living, and no harm was done. But during the past twenty years the immigrant has not been distributed promiscuously throughout the country; on the contrary, he has been colonized, and there are many communities in which scarcely a word of English is now spoken. We find in our large cities, districts called "Little Hungary," "Little Italy," the "Ghetto," and in these colonies the people live practically as they lived in the countries from which they came.

In the coal fields of Pennsylvania, in which mining was formerly carried on by Americans, or by English-speaking immigrants, an entire transformation has taken place. About thirty-five years ago emigrations were started from southern Europe and these men were put to work mining coal at one end of the great anthracite valley. Those of you who have read the history of the Huns and the Vandals and how they overran the countries of Europe, can see in Pennsylvania a peaceful repetition of that invasion. Slowly but surely these men from southern Europe, coming year by year in

ever-increasing numbers, drove before them the miners and mine workers who preceded them as workmen in the coal fields. Not a violent blow was struck; not an unlawful act committed; but just as surely as, in the history of nations, one race ever over-ran another, these people from southern Europe over-ran the English-speaking people of the coal fields. They drove them from town to town and from district to district, until the English-speaking miners made their last stand at the upper end of the valley, where mining ceases and the coal out-crops. In a few years more they will have disappeared altogether. They have been driven entirely from their homes and the homes of their ancestors. The whole region is now populated by non-English-speaking people. Cities with a population of 20,000 are just the same as are some of the cities in southern Europe. Children are being reared amidst surroundings which will retard for two or three generations their assimilation and their development into real Americans.

Years ago the child born of foreign parents in this country lost all characteristics of, even the resemblance to, the race whence he came; he took on the type of the American; but such is not the case in communities where immigrants are colonized. True, their children are required to go to school and they learn to read and write. Under proper conditions and given a fair chance, they would develop rapidly, but the absence of the American standard of living and the American ideals renders it impossible that children in these districts shall make progress rapidly. The parents of these children grew up in their own countries under conditions dissimilar to the conditions established here; they started to work when they were five or six or seven years of age. It is difficult for them to understand the necessity of having their children remain in school until they are fourteen years of age; yet we Americans would regard it as an outrage if our children were compelled to work in the mines, the mills or the factories before they were fourteen years of age.

The system of colonizing immigrants is not only destructive of the standard of living of wage earners, but it is a menace to American ideals. The American workingmen—and this includes, generally speaking, the immigrants now in our country—favor legislation which will reduce the number of immigrants seeking admission and raise the standard of those who gain admission. This legisla-

tion is calculated not only to benefit the American workingman, but it is equally in the interest of the immigrant already here. We propose that the head tax of four dollars which an immigrant must now pay as a condition of being admitted to our country shall be increased to twenty dollars, and that it shall be required of a prospective immigrant that he be able to read or write some section of the constitution of the United States, either in our language, or in some other language. A law of this kind would not evade or violate our treaty obligations with other nations, because it would affect all nations alike. I feel sure that a provision of this character would not be regarded as revolutionary or radical, and yet it would have the effect of excluding thirty-three per cent of those who under the present laws seek and secure admission at our ports. I believe that we could with safety to ourselves and with broad-minded justice to the people of other countries, admit and assimilate from 150,000 to 200,000 immigrants each year; but we cannot continue, without injury to ourselves, to admit a million people every year. Cosmopolitanism, like charity, begins at home; and while we must continue, within proper limitations, to be an asylum for the oppressed and persecuted people of the world, yet in doing this we must be mindful of our obligation to maintain a high standard of life, labor, and civilization in our own country.